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CULTURAL ONLINE FLIPBOOK MAGAZINE

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FIRST OF ITS KIND FROM KERALA

VOL-1 ISSUE - 42
JAN 28, 2022

42

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SILENT VALLEY

SOUNDS OF SILENCE: A FOREST THAT SURVIVED 'DEVELOPMENT'

TEXT BY: JEMIMA ROHEKAR

CULTURAL eMAGAZINE
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Editor's Note

Conservation of Forest and Wildlife

Forests serve as a natural resource and habitat for a wide variety of living organisms on the earth. Millions of animal species take shelter in forests. Conservation of forests is one of the major steps to be taken to bring back sustainability in ecosystems. Here are some of the ways using which we can conserve forests and promote sustainability by..

Controlling and regulating deforestation
Afforestation
Control forest fires
Proper care

An animal species that is not domesticated constitutes wildlife. Thus, any living creature that lives in forests forms wildlife. It is found in practically all environments like rainforests, fields, meadows, deserts, and so on. Wildlife is a vital and crucial part of our environment. Here are a few points on how to conserve wildlife with utmost importance.

Prevent deforestation
Develop protective areas
Protecting critically endangered species
Ban on wildlife hunting

Over the past few decades, deforestation has been happening at an alarming rate. The consequences of deforestation include elevated temperature levels (global warming), elevated sea levels, increased greenhouse effect, and wildlife extinction.

Happy Reading...!!
Varghese T. Thomas

Amazing
TO KNOW

With every blow of an axe in the land of Iraq, an artifact comes out Archaeologist Edward Keira, from the book They Wrote on Clay. Dozens of tablets bearing cuneiform inscriptions were found at Talo archaeological site north of the city of Nasiriyah in southern Iraq (Mesopotamia).
History opens its doors for us again, and we will discover many secrets and mysteries that surrounded our civilization by deciphering those tablets and knowing the treasures they contain of valuable information that would change the face of history.

Contribution : Sumerian Esu

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One of two remaining brick Temples of Deulghata in Bengal, India. Deulghata means “land of the temples” and is considered one of the rich heritage sites of the Purulia district which bears the marks of ancient Indian history, especially Jainism.

Jainism, known as Jain Dharma, is an ancient transtheistic religion of thought and philosophy. It is neither theistic or atheistic, but beyond both. The temples of this region both brick and stone, date to 945CE…

Contribution : Ajit Mukherjee

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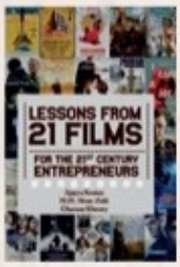

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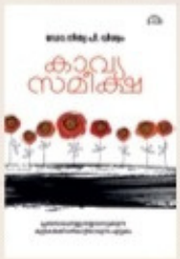

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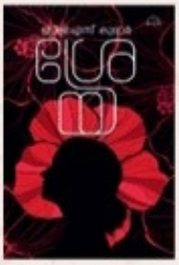

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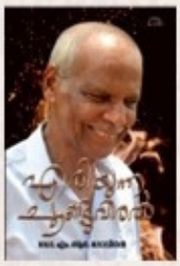
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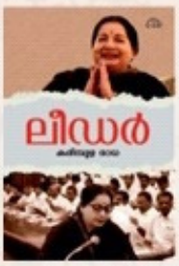

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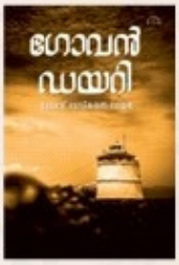

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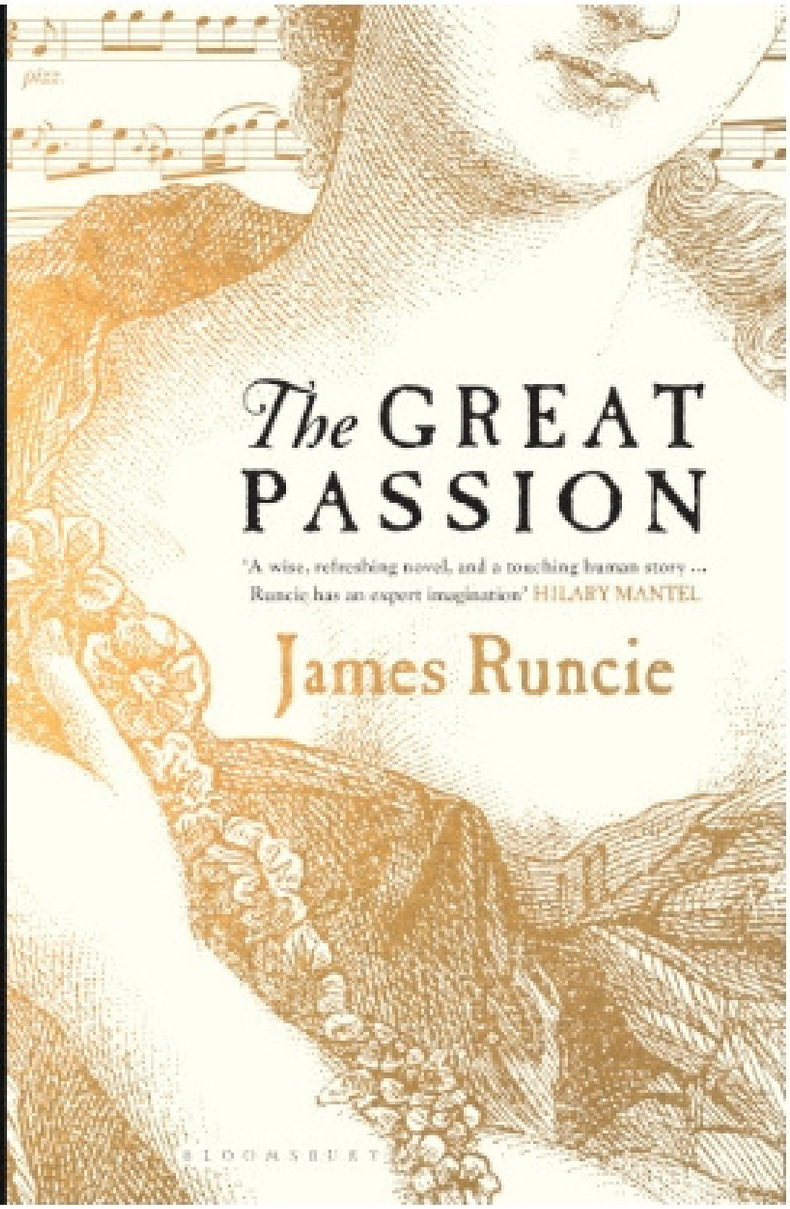

About the book:

Runcie's latest novel, The Great Passion, tells of 11 year old Stefan and his time in Leipzig, where he trains as a singer in the St Thomas Church choir after losing his mother. While there, amidst the cruelty of his fellow students and teachers, Stefan's talent catches the eye of the Cantor – Johann Sebastian Bach. Eccentric, obsessive and kind, Bach rescues Stefan from the miseries of school by bringing him into his home as an apprentice.

SILENT VALLEY

SOUNDS OF SILENCE: A FOREST THAT SURVIVED 'DEVELOPMENT'

A trip to the Silent Valley National Park is a valuable lesson in the history of environmental movements and biodiversity conservation

Silent Valley National Park reinforces the fact that forests and their resident biodiversity are our greatest wealth

Text by: Jemima Rohekar

Former Sr. Asst. Editor
Down To Earth Magazine

Since the day I was assigned to write about Kerala's Silent Valley National Park, a 90-sq km stretch of tropical evergreen forest tucked in the Western Ghats, I have been asked a question over and over again: why is it called Silent Valley? It is a peculiar name in a country like ours. >>

SILENT VALLEY

Silent Valley National Park reinforces the fact that forests and their resident biodiversity are our greatest wealth

Since the day I was assigned to write about Kerala's Silent Valley National Park, a 90-sq km stretch of tropical evergreen forest tucked in the Western Ghats, I have been asked a question over and over again: why is it called Silent Valley? It is a peculiar name in a country like ours. There are more than 100 national parks in India, most of them named after either a physical feature like a river or a mountain; a historical or mythological place or character; an animal; or a former prime minister. Only two names inspire the imagination: the Valley of Flowers National Park in Uttarakhand and Silent Valley. >>

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SILENT VALLEY

In a booklet titled “Storm Over Silent Valley”, senior environmental journalist Darryl D’monte notes its widely accepted etymology. The valley was originally known as Sairandhri, another name for Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas. And the river flowing through it is called Kunthipuzha, after their mother. When an Englishman, who discovered this virgin forest in colonial times, found that that there was no white noise of the cicadas after dark, common in other forested areas, he renamed it the Silent Valley.

A special forest no one has heard of

Silent Valley is one of India’s few rainforests. D’monte writes that it would be more correct to call it a shola forest, a type of vegetation found only at the base of valleys in the western hills of south India. Surrounded by high ridges, the forest is deep and virtually impenetrable. So secluded is Silent Valley that there is no written record of any human habitation in its core area. >>

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While there are some tribal settlements in the buffer zone, the mere fact that the forest is unspoilt by humans is enough to raise my suspense. I am also eager to visit the site of the first and most bitterly fought environment v development debate in India.

I arrive in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, and decide to hire a taxi to Mukkali, the base camp of the Silent Valley National Park, around 62 km away. Armed with a 20-word-strong Tamil vocabulary generously sprinkled with English, I start asking around for a way to the park. But the mention of Silent Valley invites raised eyebrows and casual shrugs from taxi drivers and shopkeepers alike. No one has heard of it before. I thought that the city's taxi drivers would be used to a steady stream of tourists and nature enthusiasts headed for the national park. >>

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They are not. I cannot blame them though. Eleven years ago, I spent three days reporting on tribals as a student in Attapadi, within a whispering distance of Silent Valley. Apart from a passing reference to the forest, I had then remained largely indifferent to its momentous environmental history. With so much written and spoken about this forest, why is Silent Valley still unknown to or underappreciated by people? Is the valley's silence a boon or a curse?

"I first heard about Silent Valley in 1972 when a newspaper article announced the Kerala government's plan to build a hydropower project over the Kunthipuzha (Kunthi River)," says M K Prasad, one of the pioneers of the Save Silent Valley movement.

He was then a teacher of botany at a college in Kozhikode. When he visited the forest, he realised that building a dam would be nothing short of a blunder. "The forest was impenetrable and largely undisturbed. If the dam had been built, it would have started degrading the forest system slowly and we would have lost the entire forest over a period of time," he adds. >>

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SILENT VALLEY

The idea for a dam had taken root in the 1920s. The natural drop of the Kunthipuzha river, as it flows into the plains, is the highest in Kerala at 857 metres, making it the ideal site for a hydropower project. After Independence, multi-purpose river valley projects became a top priority to fulfill the country's requirements for irrigation and electricity. So much so that by 1979, Government of India had invested nearly 14 per cent of the total planned expenditure on dams and canals. One of these projects was in Silent Valley; a 131-metre-high dam, which would generate 240 MW of electricity and irrigate 10,000 hectares of land in Kerala's Palghat and Malapuram districts. The project was, however, never to be.

One of a kind

Back in Coimbatore, I finally find a taxi driver who offers to take me to Mukkali by following the route on Google Maps. Soon enough, we are going up and down winding roads in the countryside from Tamil Nadu to Kerala. Banana, coconut and areca nut plantations line the road, protected by electric fencing to keep elephants from destroying the crop. >>

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SILENT VALLEY

My visit to the national park is scheduled for the following day, and I am anxious to meet my guide, Mari, a 42-year-old tribal watcher popularly known as the “encyclopaedia of the Silent Valley National Park”. He has been working with the Park since he was 15 years old, guiding forest officers, botanists, zoologists, photographers and tourists through the verdant labyrinth. He has only a little formal education and speaks almost no English, but is well-versed with the scientific names of innumerable species of plants, animals, birds and insects. A recipient of awards for his conservation work, Mari had also been invited by England’s Prince Charles for a meeting on a visit to Kerala.

At the forest office in Mukkali, just as I am about to leave for my accommodation at Bommiyampadi about 13 km away, a mini bus pulls into the gate. Staff members, who have already heard that I am looking for Mari, start calling out to me, “Madam, Mari! Madam, Mari!” Out steps a tall, slender man with eager eyes and a polite smile. Mari has just returned with a group of tourists from the Park, their faces glowing from the treasures they have seen. I say namaskar to him and someone steps in to translate. >>

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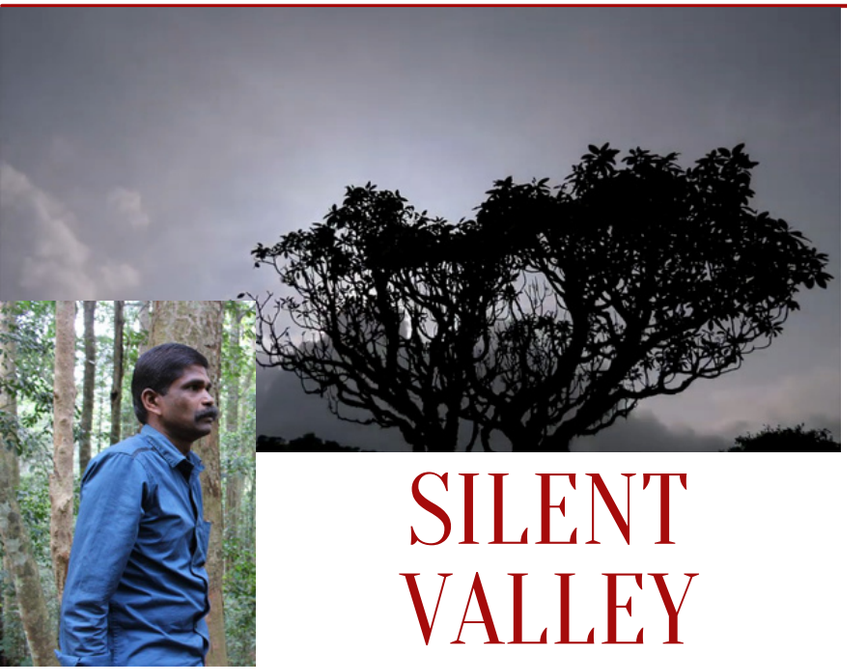

SILENT VALLEY

"I learned about the forest's species from many Western botanists and zoologists who visited Silent Valley through the years. I find it very interesting," he says. "The irony is I do not know what many species are called in Malayalam as no Malayali ever taught me."

Mari has inherited a precious legacy. His father, Letchiappan, was one of the three "unofficial guides" who had helped conservation experts study the uniqueness of the forest at the height of the Silent Valley dam controversy in the 1980s.

The next morning, our jeep represents a full house—the driver, Mari, Beat Forest Officer Ameen Ahsan S, a couple of friends from Coimbatore to help with translation, and myself. As we drive into the forest, we are surrounded by a riot of green. Mari points to camera traps fixed to tree trunks and Ameen informs us that these traps have recorded the presence of five tigers. There are also leopards and at least two black panthers in the forest, among other predators. Though the dense forest makes wildlife sightings rare, Silent Valley's most famous residents do not disappoint us. >>

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SILENT VALLEY

Perched on the branches on the way is a group of Lion Tailed Macaques (LTM), a primate classified as “endangered” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The animal had become the mascot of the Save Silent Valley movement in the 1970s and 80s, with protestors arguing that a hydropower project would destroy the LTM’s habitat and severely diminish its numbers. The Malabar Giant Squirrel and the Nilgiri langur also make an appearance. All three animals are endemic to the Western Ghats.

Charming as they are, the real magic of Silent Valley lies in its smaller or not usually noticeable habitants. At one point, we stop to admire a 200-year-old jackfruit tree. It still produces fruits for elephants, LTMs and birds alike. I crane my neck to see the tree top, but it is too tall and the canopy too thick to see through. Trees grow about 30-45 metres tall in a tropical rainforest and the canopy is so thick that it takes rainwater at least half an hour to percolate down the three to four layers to the ground, says Ameen. As we walk some of the way, I point at everything I have not seen before and pat come the common English and scientific names from Mari. >>

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Trees, ferns, leaves, flowers, mushrooms, spiders, butterflies, bees, dragonflies, lizards…Mari knows them all. He explains their features and also identifies birds by their calls.

A viper snake is curled along the road, its colour such that we would have walked right by if Mari and Ameen had not pointed it out. They guess that it has probably just eaten and is not likely to move much for a long period of time. We are no doubt relieved. A few hundred metres ahead, a large serpent eagle sits on a branch in the shade of the thick canopy, its watchful eyes taking in the surroundings. One slowly realises that the forest is a hub of thousands of interdependent and coexisting habitats.

The 1982 report of the joint committee chaired by M G K Menon, which assessed the potential ecological impacts of the hydropower project, states that Silent Valley has a high level of species diversity. With 118 vascular plants of 84 species in just 0.4 hectares of sampled area, the report quotes studies which show that the species diversity of Silent Valley is similar to that of the tropical rainforest of the Barro Colorado island in the Panama canal, considered worldwide as a prototype for measuring plant and animal diversity. >>

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The Zoological Survey of India findings indicated that Silent Valley could turn out to be a major potential reservoir for agents of biological control, given the presence of many predator and parasite species.
We pass by a few wild pepper trees. In the committee report, the Botanical Survey of India had noted that the Silent Valley plateau was home to wild relatives of domesticated plants, including cardamom, pepper, turmeric, ginger, cinnamon and beans, among others. As it has remained largely protected from human influence, Silent Valley is a thriving gene bank, which might one day come to our rescue if we were to lose our existing crop varieties to diseases and resistant pests.

Since 1984, when the national park was formed, experts have discovered many new species of plants, amphibians and insects. Thus, the forest, with an evolutionary age of more than 50 million years, is possibly home to thousands of as yet undiscovered species.

As we stand atop the Park's 30-metre-high watch tower overlooking the valley, clouds flow over the hills, thickly carpeted by trees and grasslands as far as the eye can see. It is the last week of October and both Mari and Ameen are worried that it has not been raining as expected. >>

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"Deficient rainfall has reduced the forest density. The germination of seeds has been affected and undergrowth has also reduced. The flow of water in streams is lower than usual," they say. (By December 21, when the magazine went to press, the October to December rainfall in Kerala was 61 per cent below normal.) Mari points to the area where the dam was to come up four decades ago. What would have happened if it had come up, I ask. "…then these hillsides would have been covered with hotels and restaurants," he says. "Only a murderer can try to spoil this forest. It cannot be the work of a sane human being."

A movement is born

Botany teacher M K Prasad had also foreseen the impact a hydropower project in Silent Valley would have. Home to 1,000 species of flowering plants, 107 species of orchids, 100 ferns and fern allies, 500 species of butterflies and moths, 292 species of birds, among others, the Silent Valley forest was teeming with life. He wrote an article in the journal of the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP), a people's science movement of which he was a member. The article was against the project in its entirety and received a huge response. >>

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Soon, the issue began to be discussed in the media and public meetings. Organisations such as the Bombay Natural History Society, Friends of the Trees Society, and WWF also started supporting the protest campaign.

The Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) did everything in its power to change the narrative in its favour. It argued that the project would provide electricity to power-deprived northern Kerala, that the dam's reservoir would submerge only a small area of the forest (830 ha) and tried to convince the public that there was nothing special about the Silent Valley forest.

SILENT VALLEY

The Save Silent Valley movement, which by then counted professors and scientists among its supporters, refuted their claims. This only pushed KSEB to try harder. Prasad says that except The Hindu and The Indian Express, KSEB was able to buy out or influence all English and Malayalam media into supporting the dam. It accused Prasad of being an agent of the United States. >>

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SILENT VALLEY

"I once received an anonymous letter from someone claiming to be an employee of the KSEB, warning me not to accept an invitation from their employees' union to visit Silent Valley to seek my advice. It claimed that the plan was to get me killed," Prasad recalls calmly. He did receive an invitation soon after, which he declined.

Meanwhile, the government formed committees to study the impact of the hydropower project on the forest's ecology. While one committee suggested safeguards, which the Kerala government readily accepted, another led by then agriculture secretary M S Swaminathan recommended that the project be scrapped.

When Indira Gandhi was re-elected as the prime minister in 1980, she asked Kerala to stop work on the dam until the impacts of the project could be thoroughly reviewed. It culminated in the formation of the M G K Menon committee. Its report said that the 830-ha area that was to be submerged was an "important example of genuinely intact riparian system". It added that the dam would result in "reduction of habitat size and species diversity", enhance the extent of disturbance to the ecosystem and give humans access to Silent Valley. >>

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SILENT VALLEY

The hydropower project was finally scrapped and declared a national park on November 15, 1984. It was a watershed moment in environmental history. “Nature conservation was largely limited to afforestation before the controversy. But the movement gave birth to the idea of carrying out an environment impact assessment of every development project before being given a go-ahead. Public hearings also became a must. I was fortunate to be associated with such a movement,” Prasad says.

As I leave Prasad’s home in Kochi in a cab, the driver and I talk about actor and demi-god Mohanlal’s latest blockbuster. When I tell the driver I am visiting Kerala on an assignment to cover Silent Valley, he looks at me in the rearview mirror and asks, “What is Silent Valley?” <>

First published in Down to Earth Magazine

Noted environmentalist Prof M K Prasad, a prominent figure in the historic grassroot level movement to save the evergreen tropical rain forests in Kerala’s Silent Valley from destruction, passed away on Jan 17, 2022.

SALIENT VALLEY STORY PHOTO CREDIT:

Suresh Elamon & Bala Chandran V

The photographs have been taken from the documentry KAANANAM -The Spirit of Salient Valley by Suresh Elamon. A special thanks goes to KSFDC.

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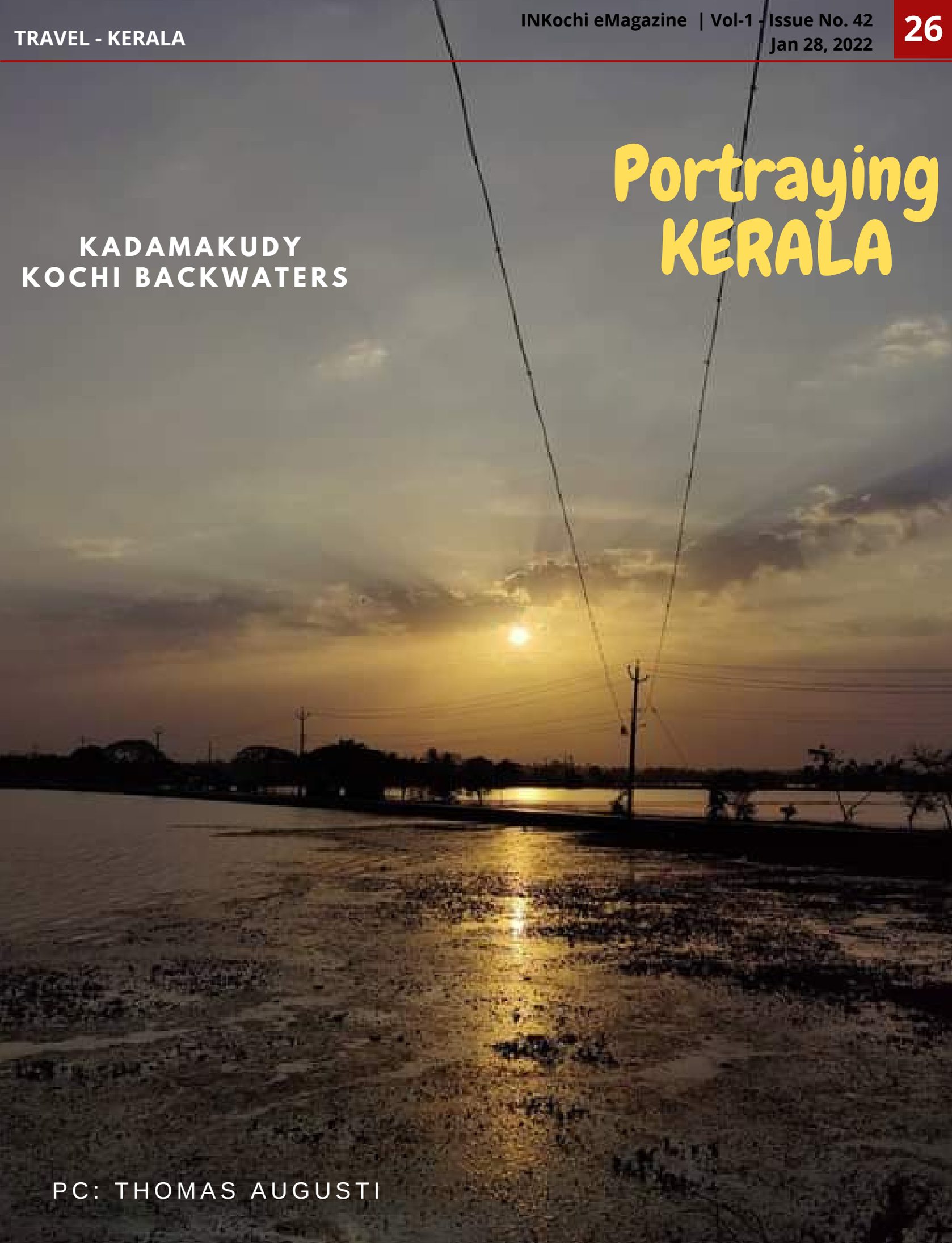
By:
Sudhir Shivaram

Portraying KERALA



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PC: THOMAS AUGUSTI

Twisted Whisky Sour

Recipe by Shatbhi Basu, Beverage Consultant and Director of STIR Academy of Bartending

Ingredients:

- 45 ml Whisky
- 20 ml lime juice
- 30 ml orange juice
- 10 ml sugar syrup
- Half slice Orange, to garnish
- 2-3 drops of Angostura Bitters
- A bucket of ice cubes

Method:

- Fill 3/4 the shaker with ice.
- Add all the above mentioned ingredients and shake.
- Strain into a rocks glass (if possible), filled with ice.
- Garnish with half a slice of orange.
- Drizzle a few drops of Angostura bitter, and serve.

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- Coconut – 15 Grams
- Bananas – 1 No's

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- Mix the butter with the Jaggery
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- Spread a spoonful of the spiced butter inside each skin
- Place the bananas, curved-side up – so the butter doesn't leak when it melts – onto individual sheets of foil large enough to wrap them completely
- Crimp up the foil to make a parcel, and then put onto the embers for 15 minutes turning once
- The bananas should be sticky and caramelized, but check one and cook for longer if necessary
- Serve with Ice Cream.

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